DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 630 EA 028 074

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TITLE What Portion of the Knowledge Base Do Practicing Administrators Utilize?
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (50th, Corpus Christi, TX, August 6-10, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Education; Administrator Responsibility; Administrator Role; *Decision Making; Decision Making Skills; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Problem Solving; *School Administration
IDENTIFIERS *Knowledge Base for Administration

ABSTRACT

There is a lack of empirical evidence describing the actual problems encountered by school leaders and the knowledge that they use to find solutions to those problems. This paper presents findings of a study that explored the problems faced by members of a graduate educational-administration class. The participants, 22 practicing public school administrators, first recorded the decisions and problems that they had faced over the span of one week. They then analyzed the problems according to 17 knowledge-base domains, as outlined by the 1993 Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. The study sought to identify which portion of the educational-administration knowledge base that practicing administrators utilized. The findings show that vice principals spent more of their time on student problems than did principals, and that principals spent more of their time on student problems than did district-level administrators. On the other hand, district administrators spent more time with school-routine-related decisions than did principals, and principals spent more time with these decisions than did assistant principals. Principals and assistant principals dealt primarily with concerns related to student services and human relations, while district administrators were involved most frequently with personnel and education-management decisions. Overall, the participants felt that they had a considerable degree of control over their decisions, and that they encountered well-structured problems on a repeated basis. In general, they were able to relate the problems to their school districts' and schools' visions. (Contains seven end notes.) (LMI)

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ED 401 630

What Portion of the Knowledge Base Do Practicing Administrators Utilize?

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Presented at the 50th Anniversary Conference
of the
National Council of Professors of Educational Administration
August 1996, Corpus Christi, Texas

The 1993 Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration[1] contained an outline of the knowledge base in educational administration. While the authors of that knowledge base were quick to point out that this was but one possible "outline," they did present some survey evidence that that particular outline, unlike a number of other outlines[2], was based upon a consensus among practicing administrators and educational administration faculty.

This exploratory study follows that version of the knowledge base. However, while that earlier work reported that survey "results were coalescing around seventeen knowledge base sub-fields,"[3] that agreement pertained to the knowledge base--not what portion of the knowledge base practicing administrators were actually utilizing. As Prof. Kenneth Leithwood has said

> ...there is almost no empirical evidence describing the actual problems that are encountered by school leaders and the knowledge that expert leaders use in their solution.[4]

This exploratory study began with each member of a graduate educational administration class making a list of the decisions and problems they faced over the span of a week in April (1995). They were asked to keep contemporaneous notes, or at least summarize their problems/decisions at the end of each day. That list provided the raw data for this research. The class was composed of twenty two practicing public school administrators--twelve assistant principals, seven principals, and three district level administrators, including one superintendent, all having five or fewer years of administrative experience.

Each participant defined what constituted a problem/decision, in terms of their own thought processes. Generally, the participants mentioned individual problems/decisions which they faced in sequencial order during the day, requiring some response. Very few over-arching problems were listed, perhaps suggesting too much "busyness" and too little reflectiveness. Here are some of those problems/decisions:

1. What kind of new slide should be ordered for the kindergarten playground?
2. What consequences should follow for second grade students who stole books from the book fair?
3. How can we obtain additional funding for a Spanish class?
4. What should I say to a girl who says she might be pregnant?

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5. What advice should I give to a first year math teacher whose students exhibit a lack of understanding?
6. Teacher #1 is unhappy with teacher #2 about her lack of responsibility for her students at recess. As principal, what should I do?
7. I thought I had probable cause for searching a student for drugs, but none were found. Now the students are laughing at my suspicions. What should I do?
8. How can I help a parent who is asking for my help? His son is refusing to come to school.
9. "Mathletes"--how many teams, busses, etc.?
10. Two fights at lunch; no conflicting stories. Is suspension always the right consequence?
11. Took student home for medicine--parents not home. Should I allow the student to get and take the medicine?
12. A school bus has just returned to school; students out of control. What should I do?

Having collected the data, each practicing administrator was asked to analyze their list in the following ways: First they were asked to partition their problems/decisions into a set of categories proposed by Leithwood,[5] and secondly to partition them among the seventeen categories in the above mentioned knowledge base. Thirdly they were asked to identify the "degree of control" they had over each decision, and fourthly to assess the "well-structuredness" of each decision. Fifthly they were asked about the extent to which each decision was susceptible to a "vision-related" solution, and finally they were asked to rate their competence in making each decision.

Prof. Leithwood partitions the kind of problems administrators face into those pertaining to the internal workings of the school and those stemming from external sources:

Internal workings of the school:
1. Teachers (e.g., assignment of teaching duties, conflict among teachers)
2. School routines (e.g., attendance, budget)
3. Students (e.g., abuse, evaluation)
4. Parents (e.g., communication, involvement in school)
5. Other (e.g., non-teaching staff, plant, special events)

External sources:
1. Trustees, the state board, and outside agencies (e.g., social service groups, community health groups)
2. Other

In a monthly series of interviews from September to April, involving twenty-seven elementary principals and twenty-five secondary principals and vice principals, he found that "outside" problems encountered by these administrators amounted to only 19 percent of the total.

For the sample in this exploratory study the percentage of "outside" problems was 15 percent of the total. However, this varied widely by type of position. The percentage of external problems for the district level administrators in the sample was 54 percent; for principals, 10 percent; and for vice principals, 5 percent. Since Prof. Leithwood's sample included a higher percentage of principals, it is not surprising that his percent of the total was slightly higher than for this sample.

Considering just internal problems/decisions, the entire sample of administrators spent

21% on Teacher related problems/decisions,
13% on School Routine related problems/decisions,
34% on Student related problems/decisions,
11% on Parent related problems/decisions, and
21% on Other internal problems/decisions

Again these percentages varied by the type of administrative position. Assistant principals spent

18% on Teacher related problems/decisions,
9% on School Routine related problems/decisions,
45% on Student related problems/decisions,
10% on Parent related problems/decisions, and
18% on Other internal problems/decisions

Principals spent

24% on Teacher related problems/decisions,
17% on School Routine related problems/decisions,
22% on Student related problems/decisions,
11% on Parent related problems/decisions, and
26% on Other internal problems/decisions

District level administrators spent

24% on Teacher related problems/decisions,
24% on School Routine related problems/decisions,
10% on Student related problems/decisions,
15% on Parent related problems/decisions, and
27% on Other internal problems/decisions

As one would expect, vice principals spend much more of their time on student problems/decisions--mainly student discipline--than principals; and principals spend more of their time on student problems/decisions than district level administrators.

As experience would suggest, just the opposite pattern was found with regard to school routine related problems/decisions, parent related problems/decisions and "other" problems/decisions. District level administrators spend more time with school routine related problems/decisions than principals; and principals spend

more time with school routine related problems/decisions than assistant principals. And basically the same pattern appears to hold for parent related problems/decisions and "other" problems/decisions.

The main goal of this exploratory study was to answer the question "what portion of the knowledge base do practicing administrators utilize?"

595 problems/decisions were analyzed and categorized into seventeen knowledge base domains. Here, by percentage, is how these problems/decisions were coded within the knowledge base domains:

19% Student Services (mainly student discipline)
10% Personnel
10% Human Relations
7% Curriculum
7% Administration of Special Programs
6% School Public Relations
6% School Facilities
5% Historical, Social, Cultural, and Philosophical Foundations
4% Learning Theory
4% Systems Analysis and Design
4% Site-based Leadership
4% School Finance
3% Educational Leadership
2% District/Community Leadership
2% Education Management
2% Research Methods

305 of those problems/decisions were addressed by assistant principals. They were categorized as follows:

28% Student Services (mainly student discipline)
11% Human Relations
9% Personnel
7% Historical, Social, Cultural, and Philosophical Foundations
6% Administration of Special Programs
6% School Law and Policy Development
6% School Facilities
5% Curriculum
5% School Public Relations
4% Learning Theory
4% Systems Analysis and Design
2% Educational Leadership
2% Site-based Leadership
2% Research Methods
1% Education Management
1% School Finance
1% District/Community Leadership

254 of the total sample of 595 problems/decisions were addressed by principals. They were categorized as follows:

10% Human Relations
10% Student Services (mainly student discipline)
9% Personnel
9% School Public Relations
7% Curriculum
7% Administration of Special Programs
7% School Finance
6% Site-based Leadership
5% School Facilities
5% School Law and Policy Development
5% Systems Analysis and Design
4% Learning Theory
4% Education Leadership
4% Education Management
3% Historical, Social, Cultural, and Philosophical Foundations
3% Research Methods
2% District/Community Leadership

Just 36 of the total sample of 595 problems/decisions were addressed by the small sample of three district level administrators. They were categorized as follows:

17% Personnel
14% Administration of Special Programs
10% District/Community Leadership
10% Curriculum
7% School Law
6% Student Services (mainly student discipline)
6% School Public Relations
6% School Finance
6% Historical, Social, Cultural, and Philosophical Foundations
6% Research Methods
3% School Facilities
3% Learning Theory
3% Human Relations
3% Education Leadership
0% Education Management
0% Systems Analysis and Design
0% Site-based Leadership

The following table shows the knowledge base domains utilized by administrators at differing levels:

		Assistant Principal	Principal	District Administrator
1.	Foundations	7%	3%	6%
2.	Research Methods	2	3	6
3.	Learning Theory	4	4	3
4.	Curriculum	5	7	10
5.	Student Services	28	10	6
6.	Special Programs	6	7	14
7.	Personnel	9	9	17
8.	Education Management	1	4	0
9.	Education Leadership	2	4	3
10.	Human Relations	11	10	3
11.	Systems Analysis	4	5	0
12.	Site-based Leadership	2	6	0
13.	School Law	6	5	7
14.	School Finance	1	7	6
15.	Public Relations	5	9	6
16.	School Facilities	6	5	3
17.	District Leadership	1	2	10

There are at least two reasons for asking about the portion of the knowledge base practicing administrators utilize. First, the answer should help determine the adequacy of the knowledge base itself for addressing the problems/decisions of practice, and secondly, the answer should help determine the relevance of the professional preparation curriculum.

Gary Hartzell et al., in a book describing The Work Lives of First Year Assistant Principals[6] mentions a number of important areas where knowledge is needed by assistant principals, but where not much is known and where these topics are barely treated in the professional preparation curriculum. For example, as he points out, assistant principals need to know how to work with agencies like the police, how to deal with intense conflict between staff members, and how to oversee guidance services.

Similarly, this exploratory study suggests problems/decisions in need of further research and discussion as to whether current students will be prepared for these problems/decisions when they become practicing administrators. These problems/decisions include:

1. How to investigate a parent complaint about a teacher hitting a student for disciplinary purposes. Should the teacher be placed on administrative leave during the investigation?
2. How should a superintendent handle a teacher union complaint that principals are trying to influence a vote on the union contract?

3. How should a superintendent settle a shouting match disagreement between a principal and the director of facilities over a construction job in progress on an existing school site?
4. What factors should be considered in determining whether an individual school district should participate in a school district consortium plan for staff development?
5. How should a superintendent involve principals in the allocation of a district budget?
6. After not receiving an operational grant for a "Healthy Start" program, how should the administration proceed when the grant was developed in collaboration with numerous community groups?
7. How can a superintendent best help a principal with a classified employee protesting their evaluation?
8. How does one decide whether to include a reading recovery teacher in next year's budget.
9. How should a principal work with a mother who accuses the principal of being prejudiced and unfair to her son, while he continues to get into trouble and the principal wants to continue keeping the parent informed.
10. How does an assistant principal handle a problem such as the following, brought to her attention by a teacher: Michael, a 5'5" eighth grader likes to rough play with 4'6" Tim, a seventh grader. Tim has bruises on his arm and doesn't want to tell on Michael.
11. How should an assistant principal proceed when a parent disagrees with the suspension of his son for failure to follow a behavioral contract.
12. How does one determine which parents to ask as chaperones for a school dance?

On the other hand, to some extent this exploratory study validates what is being taught in many programs when one finds problems/decisions listed by practicing administrators, such as the following, which are commonly being addressed in preparation programs:

1. How to handle a custodian who didn't properly set up the stage after being warned three times.
2. How to handle common student discipline problems such as fights, defiance of a teacher, and smoking.
3. Teachers who get to their classrooms after the morning tardy bell rings.
4. Graffiti on bathroom wall.
5. IEP planning, monitoring, evaluation.
6. Assessment of progress relative to the school plan.
7. Review of auditor's ASB report.
8. Decision whether to acccept the city's bid to use gyms over the summer, given a lack of evening supervisory coverage.
9. Whether to allow a competing national phone carrier to provide complimentary senior key chains in return for permission to distribute post cards worth $10 in free calls, using this phone carrier.

10. Whether to approve a parent's request that their daughter be allowed to participate in graduation ceremonies even though she is not eligible to graduate, on the premise that her self-esteem would suffer otherwise. She also promises to attend summer school.
11. Math department wants to do away with heterogeneous grouping and reinstate placement by ability level.
12. New special education student; moved from neighboring district. Expulsion hearing has been scheduled in former district.
13. Problems motivating parents to run for PTA board.
14. Teacher did not leave lesson plan for substitute.
15. Deciding on a new writing and spelling program.
16. How to interpret and use district test results.

Finally the practicing administrators reported the "degree of control" they had over each decision, the "well-structuredness" of each decision, the extent to which each decision was susceptible to a "vision-related" solution, and their self-perceived competence in making each decision. This data follows:

Degree of control over the problems/decisions

	Entire sample	District Level	Principals	Assistant
1. High degree of control	31%	29%	26%	34%
2. Substantial influence on the outcome	23	45	25	20
3. Collaborative responsibility for the outcome	27	26	26	28
4. Some influence on the outcome	8		6	10
5. Very little influence on the outcome	7		9	6
6. Virtually no influence on the outcome	4		8	2

It would appear that these administrators feel that they have considerable control, given that about four-fifths of the problems/decisions were coded into the first three categories.

Character of the problems/decisions

	Entire sample	District Level	Principals	Assistant
1. Well-structured problems/decisions, repeatedly encountered by expert principals	65%	62%	57%	70%
2. Ill-structured problems/decisions that are susceptible to "behavioral channeling" wherein previously determined values can be utilized as substitutes for domain-specific knowledge	25	32	32	21
3. Problems/decisions that grow out of an undifferentiated "mess" that are not susceptible to understanding based upon previous experience	10	6	11	9

These results were not expected. Experience suggests that while most of the problems/decisions analyzed are "repeatedly encountered" by school administrators, they seem far less amenable to solution than these results report. As one vice principal reported:

> The majority of the problems I encounter are basically well structured discipline problems, and it is not difficult to find short term immediate solutions to student behavior problems when considering district policy and our student handbook. However, discipline problems become much more complex when searching for long term solutions and working for behavior modification.

Problems/decisions susceptibility to vision-related solutions

	Entire sample	District Level	Principals	Assistant
1. To a high degree	44%	42%	47%	42%
2. Substantial influence	25	48	20	26
3. Somewhat related	17	10	20	17
4. Hardly related	9		9	9
5. Not related	5		4	6

While school administrators deal with many different problems/decisions, which seem to just keep coming, Prof. Leithwood has distinguished one difference in the responses of expert as compared with non-expert school-leaders:

> What is different is the amount of consistency that principals are able to bring to their activities and decisions. Non-experts approach these activities and decisions in a relatively piecemeal fashion: for example, decisions about budget, discipline, timetabling, reporting, and staffing all may be based on different criteria. As a consequence, the overall effects of these decisions may work at cross purposes.
>
> In contrast, experts base their decisions and actions on a relatively consistent set of criteria: they can articulate direct and remote links between their actions and the instructional system. As a result, the effects of the many, seemingly trivial, unrelated, and often unanticipated decisions made by these experts eventually add up to something; their impact accumulates in a way that consistently fosters school improvement.[7]

It was interesting to see that this sample of school administrators is able to relate the problems/decisions they face to their vision for the schools and school districts where they are employed.

Preparation

	Entire sample	District Level	Prin-cipals	Assis-tant
1. I felt that I was working "at the edge of my competence" in handling this problem/decision.	10%	10%	13%	8%
2. Handling the problem/decision included some complexities.	45	65	38	47
3. I handled this problem/decision within a "crystallized" perspective.	45	25	49	45

It is hard to interpret these findings. On the one hand it seems as though this sample of school administrators feels rather well-prepared to address the problems they face. On the other hand, one might ask if these administrators too often are seeing simple solutions to complex issues by handling these problems/decisions "within a 'crystallized' perspective."

Conclusion

This exploratory study attempted to determine what portion of the knowledge base in educational administration practicing administrators utilize. Studies such as this are continually needed to determine the relevance of our research and teaching to the profession.

Footnotes

1. Wildman, Louis et al., "A Knowledge Base in Educational Administration," 1993 Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company, 1993, p. 35-60.

2. See: Hoy, Wayne K. (Ed.), The UCEA Document Base, Vol. I & II. New York: McGraw-Hill Primis, 1994. Donmoyer, Robert et al. (Eds), The Knowledge Base in Educational Administration: Multiple Perspectives. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995. Hoyle, J.R.(1982). Guidelines for the preparation of school administrators (2nd ed.). Arlington< VA: American Association of School Administrators. Hoyle, J.R. (1985, Winter). "Programs in educational administration and the ASSA preparation guidelines." Educational Administration Quarterly, 21(1), 71-93. Lampe, Scherie and Cramer, Susan, "Curricular Change in an Educational Leadership Program: A Response to the Call for Reform," The AASA Professor, Vol. 18, No. 1, Summer 1995, p. 1-6. Thomson, Scott (Ed.) (1990). Principals for our changing schools. Fairfax, VA: National Commission for the Principalship.

3. Wildman, op.cit., p. 38.

4. Leithwood, Kenneth, "Cognitive Perspectives on School Leadership," Journal of School Leadership, Vol. 5, March 1995, p. 125.

5. ibid., p. 125-126.

6. Hartzell, Gary et al. (1995). New voices in the field: The work lives of first-year assistant principals. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc.

7. Leithwood, Kenneth; Begley, Paul and Counsins, J. Bradley, Developing Expert Leadership For Future Schools. London: The Falmer Presss, 1992, p. 125.